# THE HOLLOWED SELF

JIRO LAMBERT

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# The Hollowed Self

## Jiro Lambert

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## Introduction

We have never been more connected, yet never more alone. That is the familiar complaint, the one recited into phones glowing in darkened bedrooms. But the real story is not the screen. It is the space the screen replaced.

For most of human history, the self was shaped in the rough-and-tumble of uncurated company: the pub's sticky floor, the library's shared silence, the square's accidental argument. Ray Oldenburg called these *third places,* neither home nor work but the scaffolding of belonging. Then austerity shuttered them, and we did not rebuild. We scrolled instead.

Now loneliness is a vital sign, and we have invented a vocabulary to name our wounds but too often, we use it as a weapon. We speak of *gaslighting* when

someone simply disagrees, diluting a term born from a 1938 play about psychological torture. We perform grief on Instagram feeds, mistaking Victorian mourning's private dignity for a public content loop. We banish heretics with a retweet, a secular excommunication that mirrors Puritan shunning but without the possibility of repentance. We watch the working class suffer on reality television, poverty as pornography and call it awareness.

Even our attempts at healing curdle. *Trauma bonding*, a phrase coined in 1970s hostage psychology, now means little more than shared complaining. *Setting boundaries*, once Carl Rogers' gentle invitation to honesty, has become a cudgel to abandon anyone who inconveniences us. Men, stripped of the letter-writing friendships their great-grandfathers knew, gather only to watch sport or drink, their vulnerability locked away until the suicide statistics pry it loose.

And the self hollows out further. We hoard emails and photos in server farms that cook the planet, unable to delete because deletion feels like dying. We call ourselves asexual not only from identity but from arithmetic: why partner when you cannot afford a bedroom to share? Student loans function as

a neo-dowry, delaying marriage until debt is settled. Even neurodiversity advocacy sometimes demands eye contact, forcing an autistic person to perform a neurotypical script, then calling it politeness.

This book argues that the modern self is not lost. It is *hollowed*, stripped of the thick, inconvenient, embodied community that once gave it texture. We have replaced the pub with the timeline, the square with the algorithm, the wake with the like. And in doing so, we have forgotten that the self was never meant to be filled alone.

## The death of the third place and the rise of digital loneliness

There is a particular silence that settles over a town once its last decent pub closes. Not the cheerful quiet of a Sunday morning, nor the reverent hush of a library reading room, but a deeper kind of civic muteness. The windows are boarded. The hanging sign creaks for a few months before disappearing altogether. Someone proposes luxury flats. Someone else suggests a vape shop. Eventually the building becomes another anonymous frontage in a street increasingly designed not for lingering, but for passing through.

People often speak about loneliness as though it arrived with the smartphone. We tell ourselves a comforting story: once we looked one another in the eye; now we stare at glowing rectangles. Social media, according to this narrative, hollowed out human connection and replaced friendship with algorithms, gossip with dopamine, intimacy with performance.

But this explanation, tidy as it is, mistakes symptom for cause. The loneliness epidemic did not begin online. It began when we quietly dismantled the physical architecture of ordinary social life.

For decades, Western societies have been liquidating what the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg called "third places": the informal public spaces that exist between home (the first place) and work (the second). Cafés, church halls, pubs, libraries, barber shops, union clubs, corner diners, community centres, bowling alleys, public squares, places where people gathered without appointment, obligation, or economic optimisation.

Third places were where acquaintances became friends and strangers became familiar. They formed the connective tissue of civic life. One did not need to earn entry through status or achievement. One simply arrived. And then, slowly at first and rapidly

after the financial crash of 2008, these places began to disappear.

Across Britain, libraries closed under austerity measures. Youth clubs vanished. Village halls deteriorated. Independent cafés were replaced by chains designed for rapid turnover and laptop isolation. Pubs, once treated as a near-sacred institution of British social life, shut their doors in staggering numbers. Public benches became hostile architecture. Squares were redesigned into commercial "experiences" managed by private companies with private security. Even parks acquired opening hours, surveillance cameras, and rules against loitering.

The modern city increasingly treats unscheduled human gathering as either inefficient or suspicious. This is not merely an aesthetic transformation. It is a psychological one.

Human beings are social creatures in ways far subtler than our public discourse allows. Friendship does not emerge solely from deliberate emotional labour. Much of it historically arose from repeated accidental contact. You saw the same man reading the newspaper every Thursday at the café. You exchanged nods with the woman walking her dog at dusk. The landlord knew your name. The librarian

recommended a novel. Tiny rituals accumulated into familiarity; familiarity into trust; trust into belonging.

Digital life struggles to reproduce this because the internet is fundamentally intentional. One logs on with purpose. One chooses communities explicitly. Algorithms sort us according to preference, ideology, and consumer profile. What disappears is the fertile randomness of public life, the possibility of encountering people unlike oneself without the pressure of performance.

Social media did not invent loneliness. It arrived to anaesthetise a loneliness already underway. This distinction matters because it changes where responsibility lies.

Blaming social media alone is strangely convenient. It transforms loneliness into a problem of individual behaviour and technological temptation. Put down your phone. Touch grass. Join a club. The solutions become moralistic and personal, as though society itself remains structurally healthy.

But what if the issue is that there are fewer and fewer places to go once the phone is put down? Consider the absurdity of modern urban existence. A person

may live among millions and encounter almost nobody in a meaningful sense. They travel from private flat to private vehicle to private workplace and back again. Coffee shops subtly discourage long stays unless purchases continue. Offices have become transient or remote. Churches have emptied. Local newspapers have collapsed. Trade unions weakened. High streets hollowed out by online retail now resemble logistical corridors rather than social centres.

Even gyms, among the few remaining communal institutions, are often designed around isolation: headphones on, eyes forward, no conversation. We have mistaken proximity for community.

The effects are especially visible among the young, who are routinely described as "digitally connected" despite reporting extraordinary levels of loneliness and anxiety. Older generations often mock Gen Z for lacking social skills, but this criticism ignores a brutal reality: many young people were simply never given the physical social ecosystems previous generations inherited by default.

A teenager in 1985 could disappear for hours into a public world of arcades, cafés, football pitches, shopping precincts, record shops, libraries, and cheap

diners. A teenager in 2026 encounters surveillance, pricing, and prohibition. Sit too long without buying something and staff become uneasy. Gather in groups and security appears. Public space increasingly exists for consumption rather than congregation.

The result is a generation raised in what might be called managed loneliness. Naturally they retreat online. Where else are they supposed to go?

Even the language surrounding loneliness has become oddly individualised. We speak about "self-care", therapy apps, mindfulness subscriptions, emotional resilience. These may be useful tools, but they also reveal a culture that increasingly treats emotional suffering as something to be privately managed rather than collectively alleviated.

Historically, loneliness was not merely a personal feeling. It was understood as a civic failure. This older understanding now sounds almost radical. Modern neoliberal societies prefer citizens as consumers rather than participants. Third places are economically troublesome because they generate enormous social value while often producing little profit. A library is not especially lucrative. Neither is a public square filled with pensioners chatting for three hours over inexpensive tea. Markets struggle to measure

the worth of informal social cohesion because its benefits emerge indirectly: lower crime, greater trust, stronger local identity, improved mental health.

Yet when such spaces disappear, governments eventually pay elsewhere, in healthcare burdens, addiction crises, political extremism, declining trust and mental illness. Loneliness is expensive.

One can observe this deterioration most starkly in politics. Polarisation thrives where ordinary social mixing collapses. In functioning communal societies, people encounter ideological difference embedded within daily life. The conservative chats with the socialist at the pub. The immigrant and the pensioner queue together at the post office. Human complexity moderates abstraction.

Online, however, identity becomes purified and performative. Without physical community, people increasingly experience one another as avatars rather than neighbours. Disagreement hardens because there is no underlying social fabric strong enough to contain it. The disappearance of third places has therefore not only made people lonelier. It has made societies angrier.

This helps explain why nostalgia has become such a potent political force. When people mourn "how things used to be", they are often not literally longing for old policies or fashions. They are grieving lost forms of social embeddedness. They remember towns where one could exist publicly without spending heavily, where elders remained visible within community life, where solitude was occasionally interrupted by chance conversation rather than endless scrolling.

Of course, the past was imperfect. Pubs excluded women. Clubs could be insular or discriminatory. Some communities enforced conformity cruelly. Yet acknowledging these flaws should not prevent us from recognising what has been lost.

Indeed, one reason digital culture became so dominant is because it fulfilled genuine social needs abandoned by physical society. Online gaming communities, forums, Discord servers, and social platforms often function as improvised third places for people otherwise cut off from communal life. For many disabled people, queer people, isolated rural users, or socially anxious individuals, digital space offers connection unavailable elsewhere.

The tragedy is not that online communities exist. It is that they increasingly have to bear the full weight of human sociality alone. No civilisation in history has successfully sustained itself through disembodied interaction only. Humans require public rituals of presence. We need environments where relationships can form slowly, imperfectly, and without monetisation. We need places where one may simply be among others without performing productivity or personal branding.

The ultimate failure of modern society may be that it has made togetherness feel economically irrational. One sees this in housing itself. Homes have become simultaneously more expensive and more isolating. Young adults remain trapped indoors because public life costs money. Elderly people sit alone in flats because nearby communal institutions have vanished. Parents fear letting children roam independently because the informal social surveillance once provided by community life has dissolved.

Everything becomes privatised, entertainment, leisure, friendship, even emotional support. Meanwhile governments produce endless reports about loneliness while continuing to oversee the erosion of the very spaces that prevented it.

There is an almost darkly comic quality to this contradiction. Politicians lament declining social trust while approving developments with no public square. Tech executives warn about screen addiction while designing ever more addictive platforms. Corporations release advertisements celebrating "community" while replacing local economies with frictionless delivery systems that minimise human contact altogether.

We have engineered a society optimised for convenience and are shocked to discover it feels spiritually empty. None of this means social media is harmless. Platforms often intensify envy, outrage, compulsive behaviour, and political manipulation. But they thrive because they occupy a vacuum left by disappearing public life. Criticising social media without rebuilding communal infrastructure is like condemning junk food in a city with no grocery shops.

People cannot return to public life if public life no longer exists. The deeper question, then, is whether modern societies still believe in shared existence as a public good. Not productivity. Not consumption. Not networking. Simply coexistence.

Can a civilisation survive when nearly every interaction becomes transactional? The answer may depend on whether we begin reconstructing the ordinary places where democracy once quietly lived: libraries with comfortable chairs; affordable cafés that tolerate lingering; parks designed for gathering rather than surveillance; pedestrian streets where people stroll without purpose; pubs protected not merely as businesses but as civic institutions.

These places rarely appear revolutionary. That is precisely their genius. Third places soften isolation before it hardens into despair. They create social trust invisibly, through repetition and proximity rather than ideology. They remind people that society is not an abstract battlefield but a collection of shared habits and familiar faces.

Loneliness, in the end, is not merely the absence of company. It is the absence of belonging within a physical world. And no algorithm, however sophisticated, can fully compensate for the disappearance of a room where somebody knows your name before you speak.

## Why "gaslighting" as a colloquialism harms real victims

There was a time, not very long ago, when "gaslighting" referred to something specific, frightening, and comparatively rare. The word carried the atmosphere of drawn curtains and careful manipulations; it belonged to the vocabulary of coercion, not inconvenience. To accuse someone of gaslighting was to suggest a deliberate campaign against another person's sense of reality, an erosion of confidence conducted slowly enough that the victim often failed to notice the damage until it had already reshaped the architecture of their mind.

Today, the word is everywhere. A partner forgetting to text back is gaslighting. A friend disputing a memory from a holiday in Dubrovnik is gaslighting. A politician denying a previous statement is gaslighting. A manager asking an employee to redo a spreadsheet is, depending on the mood of social media, gaslighting. The term has swollen to absorb nearly every unpleasant disagreement in modern life.

Language changes; this is unavoidable. Words drift. Meanings soften and stretch. But some linguistic changes carry consequences beyond mere imprecision. The contemporary overuse of "gaslighting" does not simply make conversation melodramatic. It risks flattening a serious form of psychological abuse into a fashionable synonym for lying, disagreement, selfishness, or emotional incompetence. In doing so, it harms the people for whom the term once provided desperately needed clarity.

The irony is that the original meaning of gaslighting emerged from art rather than medicine. The phrase derives from Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play *Gas Light*, later adapted into several films, most famously the 1944 version starring Ingrid Bergman. The story concerns a husband who manipulates his wife into believing she is losing her sanity. He hides

objects and insists she misplaced them. He denies events she clearly remembers. Most memorably, he causes the gas lamps in the house to dim, then denies that the lights changed at all when she notices. The point is not merely deception. The point is domination through destabilisation.

The abuser's objective is not to win an argument. It is to dismantle the victim's trust in their own perception. That distinction matters. Most human dishonesty is crude and ordinary. People lie to avoid consequences, preserve pride, or escape embarrassment. Someone says they are "five minutes away" while still in the shower. A spouse claims not to have spent too much money. A colleague denies forgetting an email. These behaviours may be irritating, immature, or manipulative. But they are not necessarily gaslighting.

True gaslighting is systematic. It is psychological warfare disguised as intimacy. Victims often describe the experience in eerily similar language. They begin apologising constantly. They keep notes because they no longer trust their memory. They feel exhausted after conversations yet cannot explain why. They become dependent on the abuser's version of reality because their own confidence has been repeatedly

undermined. Over time, they may appear anxious, unstable, or emotionally reactive, symptoms then used as further "proof" that their perceptions are unreliable.

What makes gaslighting uniquely cruel is that it attacks the mechanism by which people defend themselves from harm: their own judgement. Bruises can be photographed. Financial exploitation leaves records. But psychological destabilisation leaves victims struggling even to explain what happened to them. Often they sound uncertain precisely because uncertainty has been engineered into them.

This is why the recent inflation of the term feels so unsettling to many survivors of emotional abuse. When every argument becomes "gaslighting", the word loses its capacity to identify a distinct form of coercion. The concept dissolves into internet shorthand.

Social media accelerated this transformation with astonishing speed. In the early 2020s, TikTok and Instagram became vast informal academies of therapeutic language. Millions encountered terms like "trauma response", "love bombing", "narcissist", "attachment style", and "gaslighting" not through clini-

cians or literature but through short-form videos delivered by charismatic strangers against backgrounds of indoor plants and beige décor.

Some of this democratisation of psychological vocabulary was beneficial. Many people finally recognised unhealthy relationship dynamics they had previously lacked the language to describe. Discussions once hidden by shame became visible. Emotional abuse, particularly within intimate relationships, ceased to be treated as a niche concern.

But the internet has a tendency to convert nuanced concepts into moral accessories. Clinical language becomes aesthetic language. Diagnostic terminology becomes identity performance. Complexity disappears because algorithms reward certainty, emotional intensity, and instant recognition.

The result is a culture in which describing oneself as psychologically harmed confers a strange kind of authority, while accusing others using therapeutic vocabulary provides a rapid moral victory. "Gaslighting" is especially attractive because it does more than allege dishonesty. It implies malicious intent and psychological cruelty. It transforms ordinary conflict into evidence of abuse.

A friend says, "I never agreed to that plan," and suddenly a brunch disagreement acquires the emotional gravity of coercive control. Part of the problem is that modern culture increasingly struggles to tolerate ambiguity in relationships. Disagreement is no longer merely disagreement; it must reveal pathology. Forgetfulness becomes manipulation. Selfishness becomes narcissism. Emotional incompatibility becomes trauma. We search constantly for diagnostic explanations because they provide moral clarity in situations where reality is usually messier.

But memory itself is imperfect. Human beings misremember events continually. Two siblings can recall the same childhood dinner entirely differently without either being abusive. Couples often disagree sincerely about tone, phrasing, or intention. One person may feel ignored while the other feels overwhelmed. None of this requires clinical terminology.

To collapse all interpersonal friction into abuse language is to misunderstand both abuse and ordinary humanity. There is also a subtle narcissism embedded within casual accusations of gaslighting. The term assumes not merely that someone is wrong, but that they are intentionally attempting to destabilise another person's reality. Sometimes this is true. More

often, people are simply defensive, careless, stubborn, or emotionally clumsy. The contemporary appetite for psychological certainty encourages individuals to interpret all discomfort through the most morally charged framework available.

This inflation carries social consequences beyond semantics. When severe terminology becomes casual slang, listeners grow desensitised. Consider how words like "trauma" and "triggered" have already drifted from clinical contexts into everyday hyperbole. Someone describes a mildly embarrassing school memory as "traumatic"; another claims to be "triggered" by an inconvenient email. The original meanings do not disappear entirely, but they become diluted through repetition and exaggeration.

The same dilution is happening with gaslighting. For genuine victims, this creates an additional burden. They must now distinguish their experiences from the flood of exaggerated claims surrounding them. Imagine trying to explain sustained psychological abuse to someone whose understanding of gaslighting comes primarily from social media clips about flatmates denying they finished the oat milk.

The word no longer reliably communicates severity. Worse still, the casual misuse of therapeutic

language can encourage people to avoid the ordinary discomfort necessary for healthy relationships. Mature intimacy requires negotiation between competing perceptions. Sometimes we are wrong. Sometimes our memory fails. Sometimes another person's interpretation is more accurate than our own. If every challenge to our perspective is framed as psychological abuse, self-reflection becomes nearly impossible.

There is a profound difference between "You are imagining things" used strategically over months to destabilise a partner, and "I think you misunderstood me" said during an argument. The inability to recognise that difference impoverishes emotional life.

None of this means the concept itself is unimportant. Quite the opposite. Gaslighting deserves linguistic precision precisely because the phenomenon is real and devastating. Victims of coercive control often spend years struggling to reclaim trust in their own minds. Some emerge from relationships unable to make simple decisions without reassurance. Others become socially isolated because they have been convinced that their reactions are irrational. The abuse can persist long after the relationship ends, internalised as chronic self-doubt.

To preserve the seriousness of the term is not pedantry. It is respect. There is an understandable cultural reason for the popularity of therapy language. Modern people are searching for frameworks that explain emotional pain. Traditional structures, religion, extended family, stable community life, hold less authority than they once did. Psychological vocabulary fills the vacuum. It offers both explanation and absolution. If a relationship failed because the other person was "gaslighting" you, then the narrative becomes morally legible. Villains are comforting because they simplify suffering.

But language should illuminate reality, not flatten it into content-friendly archetypes. The original *Gas Light* endures because it captured something terrifyingly intimate: the possibility that another person might colonise your perception so completely that you no longer trust your own senses. That fear remains potent because it touches something fundamental about human identity. Our continuity depends upon confidence in our own consciousness. To lose faith in that is to lose orientation within oneself.

Such experiences deserve more than reduction into internet slang. Words matter not because language is fragile, but because human experience is. When

serious terminology becomes casual decoration, the people most wounded by the realities those words describe often disappear beneath the noise. The solution is not censorship, nor the policing of every exaggerated phrase uttered online. Hyperbole is eternal. People will always dramatise their arguments.

But perhaps we might regain some respect for proportion. Not every disagreement is abuse. Not every lie is gaslighting. Not every unpleasant relationship contains a diagnosable pathology.

And when everything is called gaslighting, the people truly living in the dark become harder to see.

## The gentrification of grief
## How social media turned mourning into content

There was a time when grief arrived quietly. It entered through the back door of life and sat heavily in the house, changing the air in every room. It did not ask to be understood by strangers. It did not announce itself in square images or carefully edited captions. Mourning was visible, certainly, but it belonged to a social world that understood restraint. One wore black. One stayed home. Curtains were drawn. Time slowed. The bereaved were not expected to explain themselves to an audience.

Today, grief comes with formatting requirements. Within hours of a death, there are tributes to post, photographs to select, anecdotes to compress into di-

gestible sentiment. The modern mourner is expected not merely to feel loss, but to curate it. Silence now appears suspicious, almost cold. If a person does not post, others begin to speculate: Are they in denial? Were they not close? Why have they said nothing?

The transformation has been so gradual that many scarcely notice how radically mourning has changed. We tend to frame social media as a tool that simply reflects human behaviour. In reality, it reshapes behaviour by rewarding what is visible and penalising what is private. Grief, once among the most intimate human experiences, has been remodelled according to the logic of content creation.

The result is not simply tastelessness or oversharing. It is something deeper: the erosion of private emotional space. Victorian Britain, despite its reputation for emotional repression, understood something important about mourning. The nineteenth century imposed elaborate rituals around death, many of which now appear excessive or theatrical. Widows were expected to wear black crepe for months or years. Social calendars contracted. Jewellery containing strands of the deceased's hair was commonplace. Etiquette manuals specified appropriate durations for grief according to familial proximity. There were

rules for stationery, rules for introductions and rules for when one could reasonably laugh in public again.

To modern sensibilities, such conventions seem oppressive. Yet they served a psychological function. Mourning etiquette externalised grief. Society recognised bereavement as a distinct state requiring protection from ordinary demands. The bereaved were granted distance from performance because the rituals themselves carried the burden of signalling sorrow.

One did not need to constantly declare pain. The black clothing spoke already. Contemporary culture congratulates itself for rejecting these rigid conventions. We imagine ourselves freer, more emotionally honest and less constrained. Yet social media has quietly replaced old mourning codes with new ones that are no less prescriptive and arguably far more invasive.

The Victorian widow wore black because society demanded visible grief. The modern mourner posts tribute slideshows because the algorithm demands emotional legibility.

The difference is that Victorian rituals were finite and communal, while digital mourning is endless and

performative. Social media platforms transform grief into an ongoing narrative project. The dead become recurring content. Birthdays, anniversaries, old text messages, voice notes, photographs and "memories" are continuously resurfaced by applications designed to maximise engagement. The bereaved are trapped in a technological hall of mirrors where mourning never settles into silence because the platforms profit from emotional recurrence.

What was once sacred becomes ambient. The language of online grief has become strangely homogenised. Every tribute begins to resemble every other tribute. "I can't believe you're gone." "Heaven gained an angel." "I hope you knew how loved you were." The captions are accompanied by carefully selected photographs: sunlit smiles, hospital hand-holding, blurry childhood snapshots, black-and-white filters for gravity. There is often a final image designed for emotional climax.

One hesitates to criticise individuals for participating in this culture because many are sincere. Most grieving people are not cynical opportunists. They are trying, often desperately; to locate their pain within a social framework that now barely exists outside digital space. But sincerity does not negate

performance. Indeed, social media's most powerful illusion is that authenticity and performance are opposites when, increasingly, they are fused.

People now grieve while simultaneously observing themselves grieving. The phone enters the funeral before the coffin is lowered. Mourners photograph floral arrangements, funeral programmes, even open caskets. TikTok creators document "the day we buried my mum" with cinematic music and soft lighting. Influencers cry on camera in cars because the visual language of vulnerability performs well online. The modern internet encourages emotional exhibition not because it values emotional truth, but because emotional intensity sustains attention.

Attention is the currency beneath all this. Social media platforms flatten distinctions between tragedy and ordinary life. A memorial post appears between holiday photographs, gym selfies and restaurant recommendations. The architecture of the feed treats all experience as content units competing for engagement. Death is absorbed into the same system that markets skincare products and holiday rentals. Grief becomes aesthetically optimised because every post exists within a visual economy.

This alters not only how people express sorrow but how they experience it internally. Private mourning once allowed for emotional incoherence. Real grief is often dull, repetitive and unspeakably lonely. It contains long stretches of numbness. It produces ugly emotions: resentment, boredom, irritation, relief, confusion. The bereaved frequently feel detached from the sentimental narratives expected of them. But social media rewards coherence and recognisable emotional arcs. Online grief must be communicable. It must move others cleanly and quickly.

As a result, mourners increasingly edit themselves in real time. One notices this particularly among younger people who have never known adulthood without digital spectatorship. Many feel pressure to produce public grief immediately after loss, before they have even processed what they feel. The internet collapses the natural delay between emotion and expression. Silence no longer signifies contemplation; it reads as absence.

There is also a subtle competition embedded within public mourning. Social media transforms relationships into visible hierarchies. Who posts first? Who writes the longest tribute? Who appears most devastated? Which friendship photographs are selected?

The dead become centres around which the living negotiate status, intimacy and social credibility.

Funerals once contained these tensions within temporary physical gatherings. Online, they persist indefinitely. Perhaps the most unsettling consequence is the disappearance of forgetting as a humane process. Forgetting is not betrayal. It is part of survival. Earlier societies understood this instinctively. Mourning rituals were designed not merely to honour the dead but to eventually release the living back into ordinary existence.

Digital platforms resist this transition. Applications now preserve the dead with eerie efficiency. Their birthdays trigger notifications. Their profiles remain searchable. Their faces continue appearing in algorithmic "memory" compilations. The deceased linger as interactive presences within systems unable to comprehend absence. Technology, which promises remembrance, often obstructs acceptance.

There is something psychologically exhausting about perpetual memorialisation. Humans evolved with death as a definitive rupture. Contemporary technology softens the rupture into endless partial presence. The dead are never entirely gone, yet never

fully here. They become data ghosts maintained by servers and engagement metrics.

This has changed our relationship to mourning itself. Grief no longer moves cleanly through stages because digital life continually reactivates it. Every resurfaced photograph becomes a small emotional ambush.

Defenders of online mourning argue, reasonably, that social media provides community. This is true. Public expressions of grief can reduce isolation, particularly after stigmatised losses such as suicide, addiction or miscarriage. The internet allows geographically scattered families and friends to gather emotionally in ways once impossible. There is genuine comfort in collective witnessing.

But community is not the same thing as exposure. The problem is not that people share grief publicly. Humans have always mourned collectively. The problem is that contemporary platforms monetise emotional visibility and subtly pressure individuals to translate private pain into consumable narrative. Mourning increasingly occurs inside systems engineered for performance, comparison and attention extraction.

No human emotion survives unchanged under those conditions. One sees this distortion clearly in the rise of "grief aesthetics", particularly among affluent online cultures where sadness itself becomes stylised. There are now visual templates for bereavement: muted tones, minimalist typography, nostalgic film photography and carefully curated playlists. Even suffering acquires branding. The language of healing merges seamlessly with influencer culture. Grief becomes another mode of self-presentation, another chapter in the ongoing project of personal identity construction.

This is what makes the phrase "the gentrification of grief" feel apt. Gentrification transforms living communities into curated spaces optimised for visibility and consumption. Something similar has happened to mourning. The rough, private, uncomfortable dimensions of grief are being displaced by polished forms of public emotionality that photograph well and circulate efficiently.

Silence, once central to mourning, now appears socially unintelligible. Yet silence may be exactly what grief requires. The dead do not need content. They do not need tribute graphics or anniversary captions or public declarations written partly for invisible au-

diences. Often the healthiest mourning occurs away from spectators altogether: in quiet kitchens, on solitary walks, in conversations that are never recorded, in the strange intimacy of continuing ordinary life after someone has vanished from it.

Real grief is not always articulate. It does not consistently produce wisdom. Sometimes it produces only exhaustion. The pressure to publicly narrate bereavement risks interrupting the slow internal labour that mourning demands. Sorrow needs privacy because identity itself becomes unstable after loss. One must relearn reality without the deceased inside it. This process is fragile. Constant externalisation can flatten experience before it fully forms.

Our culture increasingly mistrusts interiority. Everything is expected to become visible eventually. Thoughts become tweets. Relationships become content. Meals become photographs. Death, perhaps the last truly private human event, has not escaped this logic.

But not all experiences improve when shared. The Victorians, for all their peculiar rituals and suffocating etiquette, may have understood something we are forgetting: grief deserves boundaries. Mourning is not merely expression. It is withdrawal, contem-

plation, temporary estrangement from the noise of social life. The bereaved once disappeared partially from public view because society recognised loss as a condition requiring shelter.

Now we ask mourners to perform resilience, vulnerability and remembrance simultaneously, before an audience that scrolls past in seconds. Perhaps the deepest irony is that our culture speaks endlessly about mental health while steadily eliminating the conditions necessary for emotional privacy. We encourage openness but neglect solitude. We celebrate visibility while undervaluing reflection. We have mistaken public disclosure for healing itself.

Some grief should remain unseen. Not because mourning is shameful, but because certain emotions lose meaning when continuously exhibited. Love does not become more real because it is publicly archived. Loss does not become more profound because it receives engagement.

A person sitting quietly with sorrow in a darkened room may now appear lonely, disconnected or emotionally repressed. Yet that solitary figure might possess something increasingly rare: a grief untouched by spectatorship.

And perhaps that is what healthy mourning requires, not performance, not optimisation, not visibility but the freedom to suffer without being observed.

## Cancel culture
## An excommunication without the church

The first thing to understand about cancel culture is that it is not modern. It is not even particularly digital. The hashtags, the pile-ons, the ritual apology notes typed into Notes app screenshots, these are only the latest costumes worn by one of humanity's oldest instincts: the desire to expel the impure from the tribe.

What social media has accomplished is not the invention of ostracism but its democratisation. The bishop has been replaced by the algorithm. The village square has become global. The congregation never sleeps.

And yet we continue to discuss cancellation as though it emerged from nowhere around 2015, hatched fully formed from Silicon Valley alongside ride-sharing apps and disappearing selfies. In reality, the phenomenon belongs to a much older moral tradition, one deeply rooted in religious practices of shaming, confession and excommunication. Modern cancellation is simply excommunication without the Church: decentralised, leaderless, permanently archived, and often far crueller precisely because nobody appears fully responsible for it.

The Puritans would have recognised it instantly. In seventeenth-century New England, banishment was not merely legal punishment; it was theological hygiene. Communities organised around rigid ideas of virtue believed moral contamination threatened the collective soul. To tolerate heresy was to invite divine wrath upon everyone. A dissenter was not simply wrong. They were dangerous.

The minister Anne Hutchinson learned this in 1637, when she was cast out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony after challenging clerical authority. Hutchinson's real crime was not doctrinal error so much as social destabilisation. She encouraged independent thought, questioned approved hierarchies, and gath-

ered followers around herself. The authorities feared contagion. Her exile was meant to restore moral order.

The mechanics are hauntingly familiar. A public accusation. Demands for repentance. Community-wide signalling of disapproval. Purity tests among the righteous themselves. Finally, expulsion, not merely from institutions but from social legitimacy.

Today the process unfolds through quote tweets instead of sermons, but the emotional logic is identical. The modern progressive activist who insists silence is violence would probably bristle at comparisons with Puritan magistrates. Yet both share a conviction that moral neutrality is impossible. Everyone must either denounce the sinner or become implicated in sin. Complicity itself becomes heresy.

This is why digital outrage spreads with such astonishing speed. Social media rewards moral participation. Platforms are not designed for contemplation; they are designed for visibility. One must be seen condemning the offender. Failure to join the denunciation begins to resemble tacit endorsement.

And because the internet collapses distance, every scandal becomes everybody's business. A misguided

joke made in Glasgow becomes a firing offence in Toronto. A badly phrased opinion from ten years ago is excavated like forbidden scripture. Context vanishes. Time itself becomes morally irrelevant.

The Church once believed the soul could be redeemed through confession. The internet, by contrast, often appears uninterested in redemption altogether. This is the genuinely novel aspect of cancel culture. Traditional excommunication at least possessed formal pathways back into the community. Repentance had structure. Absolution existed. The sinner could return transformed.

Digital cancellation offers no such certainty because there is no central authority capable of declaring forgiveness complete. One audience may accept an apology while another rejects it. The punishment becomes indefinite, dispersed across thousands of users, employers, journalists and strangers. Exile no longer has geographical limits. There is nowhere else to go.

The result is a culture of permanent suspicion. Every public figure now lives under conditions once reserved for clerics and monarchs: relentless scrutiny over private conduct, historical statements and ideological purity. But unlike traditional elites, ordinary

people are increasingly subjected to the same pressures. Teenagers lose university offers over viral clips. Employees are dismissed for opinions expressed outside work. Writers self-censor not because the state compels them, but because the mob might.

The defenders of cancellation often argue that consequences are simply accountability by another name. This is true, up to a point. A society without moral judgement would be monstrous. Communities have every right to condemn cruelty, racism, harassment or genuine abuse.

But the problem with cancel culture has never been accountability alone. It is disproportionality, absolutism and the ecstatic pleasure people derive from collective destruction.

Online outrage frequently resembles less a pursuit of justice than a revival meeting fuelled by adrenaline. Participants experience moral exhilaration. The target becomes an object onto which anxieties, frustrations and ambitions are projected. Punishment creates solidarity among punishers.

One sees this especially in the language. The condemned are "deplatformed", "erased", "called out", "dragged", "destroyed". The rhetoric is theatrical and

cleansing. Public humiliation functions as entertainment masquerading as ethics.

There is also something distinctly Protestant about the obsession with historical sin. The internet remembers everything because modern morality increasingly treats identity as a fixed moral ledger. A transgression does not merely indicate poor judgement; it reveals an essential corruption of character.

This is why apologies so often fail. The crowd is not evaluating behaviour but essence. If a person is judged fundamentally wicked, no statement can repair the stain.

Ironically, the supposedly secular internet has recreated many features of the religious worldview it claims to have escaped. We have retained the concepts of sin, blasphemy, confession and heresy while discarding mercy, humility and forgiveness.

The sociologist Émile Durkheim argued that punishment is less about the criminal than the community itself. Societies punish publicly to reaffirm collective values. Seen this way, cancellation is not evidence of moral collapse but of moral hunger. People crave shared standards in an age where traditional

institutions, churches, unions, civic organisations, even extended families, have weakened dramatically.

Social media stepped into the vacuum. It became a moral theatre where identity and virtue could be performed before an audience.

But platforms are catastrophically bad at moral reasoning. Algorithms reward intensity rather than wisdom. Nuance travels slowly; outrage travels instantly. The most punitive voices rise to prominence because anger generates engagement, and engagement generates profit. A village mob once burned out after sunset. The digital mob refreshes endlessly.

Meanwhile, institutions increasingly capitulate not because they possess deep moral conviction, but because fear governs them. Corporations issue statements within hours because hesitation itself now appears suspicious. Universities, publishers and media organisations often behave less like defenders of principle than medieval towns terrified of attracting plague.

This climate corrodes intellectual life. People become cautious not merely about what they say, but about what they think aloud. The space for experi-

mentation, ambiguity and honest error shrinks. Yet every worthwhile culture depends upon precisely those freedoms.

A society terrified of mistakes eventually stops producing interesting people. The deeper danger is not only censorship but moral infantilisation. When every disagreement becomes existential and every offence catastrophic, perspective disappears. Citizens lose the ability to distinguish between genuine evil and ordinary human imperfection.

Not every offensive remark indicates fascism. Not every misguided opinion constitutes violence. Not every flawed individual deserves social annihilation.

The Puritans, for all their severity, at least believed they were safeguarding eternal truths. Modern cancellation often lacks even that coherence. Today's orthodoxy shifts constantly, producing a permanent atmosphere of instability. Yesterday's righteous slogans become tomorrow's evidence of inadequacy. The crowd consumes its own with remarkable efficiency.

One of the bleakest features of digital culture is how quickly former accusers become accused. Participation offers no immunity. In fact, the loudest moral enforcers frequently face the harshest scrutiny

once their own imperfections emerge. Purity spirals inevitably inward.

This is because movements organised around purification can never truly rest. They require continual discovery of contamination.

None of this means society should abandon judgement. Some people deserve condemnation. Some actions genuinely warrant professional or social consequences. A culture incapable of shame is as dangerous as one addicted to it.

But liberal societies traditionally recognised an essential distinction between punishment and obliteration. That distinction is fading.

The internet encourages maximalism because moderation is visually unimpressive. Quiet forgiveness does not trend. Ambivalence has poor engagement metrics. Mercy is algorithmically invisible.

And yet mercy may be the very quality modern public life most desperately needs. Not sentimentality. Not the refusal to criticise wrongdoing. But the recognition that human beings are inconsistent creatures capable of change, stupidity, growth and contradiction. The recognition that permanent exile is

too severe a penalty for most offences. The recognition that a society obsessed with purification eventually becomes inhuman.

The medieval Church wielded excommunication carefully because it understood the terrifying power of social death. To be cast out from the community was not symbolic; it was existential.

Today we distribute that power casually, sometimes gleefully, through devices carried in our pockets. We tell ourselves this represents progress because the mechanisms are democratic rather than clerical. But decentralisation does not necessarily produce justice. Sometimes it merely produces chaos without accountability.

The mob has no face. The mob never apologises. And perhaps that is the strangest irony of all: in abandoning organised religion, secular society did not escape the impulse towards moral absolutism. It simply digitised it.

## The pornography of poverty

On a winter evening in 2004, millions of Britons sat down to watch strangers humiliate themselves for entertainment. A woman from Surrey, immaculate in pearl earrings and rigid domestic convictions, arrived at the semi-detached home of a family she regarded, almost immediately, as feral. The children swore. The carpets were stained. There were frozen chips in the freezer and unpaid bills on the counter. Across the country, another family watched a tattooed single mother from Hull enter a middle-class kitchen and recoil at the rules, the silence, the strange emotional sterility of a home in which nobody seemed to shout. The programme presented this exchange as sociology, or perhaps moral inquiry. In truth, it was spectacle.

The early two-thousands were the golden age of what might politely be called "hardship television": programmes that transformed class difference into mass entertainment while insisting they were merely documenting reality. The formula was brutally simple. Find people with little money, unstable lives, regional accents, poor diets, cluttered homes, limited opportunities, or visible emotional distress. Place them under studio lighting. Add ominous narration, dramatic editing, and a soundtrack hovering somewhere between comedy and pity. Then invite the audience to feel simultaneously horrified and reassured.

Reassured above all that poverty belonged to somebody else. The genius of these programmes was their ability to disguise voyeurism as concern. Viewers were not told they were laughing at the working class; they were told they were learning about "social issues." Yet the emotional architecture of the genre depended upon ridicule. The participants were framed not as citizens shaped by economics, housing policy, stagnant wages, regional decline, or generational instability, but as cautionary exhibits: messy, impulsive, vulgar, irresponsible. The camera lingered on mouldy bathrooms, supermarket value-brand meals, screaming arguments, cigarette burns, and

overdrawn bank accounts with the same hungry fascination Victorian aristocrats once reserved for Whitechapel slums.

The resemblance is not accidental. In nineteenth-century Britain, "slumming" became an oddly fashionable pastime among the wealthy. Affluent Londoners would travel into impoverished districts, often escorted by clergy, reformers, or amateur anthropologists, to observe the poor in their "natural conditions." They wandered through overcrowded alleyways with the air of tourists visiting an exotic colony. Newspaper accounts from the period describe middle- and upper-class visitors marvelling at the dirt, noise, and perceived moral collapse of working-class districts with a mixture of revulsion and excitement. Poverty became theatre. Misery became scenery.

The slummers claimed moral seriousness. They were studying society. They wished to understand deprivation. They often convinced themselves that the experience increased their compassion. But beneath the philanthropic language sat something uglier: the thrill of proximity to degradation without the risk of suffering it oneself. Slumming allowed the privileged to consume poverty aesthetically. One

could spend an evening among prostitutes, drunks, and starving children before returning home to servants, hot food, and secure inheritance. The excursion confirmed not only the existence of class hierarchy but its apparent necessity.

Reality television inherited this instinct almost perfectly. Consider the visual grammar of programmes centred on welfare recipients or struggling families. The establishing shots are nearly always identical: tower blocks under grey skies, discarded mattresses beside bins, flickering fluorescent lighting in corner shops, children running unsupervised through car parks. The camera descends upon poor communities like a police helicopter. Even before a single person speaks, the viewer has already received the message: this is a zone of dysfunction.

Then comes the editing. Reality television does not document life; it manufactures narrative. Hours of footage are compressed into caricature. The loudest arguments survive. The most chaotic parenting moments remain. Drunkenness, debt, shouting, swearing, tears: these become the punctuation marks of poverty. Nobody commissions eight-part documentaries about exhausted warehouse workers quietly making impossible financial calculations at kitchen

tables. Nobody builds a prime-time entertainment format around the slow violence of insecure labour or exploitative landlords. Structural suffering is visually boring. Public humiliation is profitable.

This is why "poverty porn," as critics eventually began calling it, relies so heavily on moral framing. The poor must not simply be struggling; they must appear culpable. Audiences are encouraged to scrutinise every purchase, every parenting decision, every cigarette packet and takeaway coffee as though poverty were primarily a consequence of personal failure rather than political design. The participant becomes both defendant and evidence.

By the time shows like *Benefits Street* arrived, the genre had refined itself into something extraordinarily cynical. Broadcasters defended such programmes as observational documentaries revealing "real Britain." Yet what they revealed, more than anything else, was the appetite of middle-class audiences for ritualised class contempt. Viewers did not merely watch poverty; they audited it. Social media filled with furious commentary about tax money, laziness, obesity, accents, and morality. The poor were transformed into performers in a national morality play where the audience could boo from the stalls.

One of the cruellest tricks of hardship television is the way it collapses economic deprivation into personal identity. Middle-class dysfunction is treated as individual tragedy; working-class dysfunction becomes cultural diagnosis. A wealthy alcoholic is troubled. A poor alcoholic represents social decay. When affluent families appear in documentaries, the camera tends to search for nuance, emotional complexity, hidden wounds. When poor families appear, editing gravitates towards chaos and spectacle. The difference is not subtle. It is ideological.

And audiences learn from it. Class prejudice in Britain has always depended less on income than on performance: how one speaks, dresses, eats, argues, decorates a home, disciplines children, or expresses emotion. Hardship television transformed these markers into mass entertainment. The working class became legible primarily through excess, too loud, too fat, too vulgar, too emotional, too chaotic. Viewers absorbed not only stereotypes about poverty but expectations about respectability itself.

This has consequences beyond television schedules. Public support for punitive welfare policies does not emerge in a vacuum. It grows within a culture saturated by images portraying the poor as reck-

less consumers of public generosity. Years of reality television helped construct a political atmosphere in which benefits claimants were discussed less as citizens in precarious circumstances and more as parasitic characters from entertainment formats. The line between documentary and propaganda became surprisingly thin.

None of this means poverty should never appear on television. Sanitising deprivation would be dishonest and obscene in its own way. The question is one of perspective and power. Who controls the narrative? Who profits from exposure? What emotional response is being cultivated in the audience?

There is a profound difference between journalism that investigates structural inequality and entertainment that converts suffering into spectacle. Ken Loach films, for example, are often accused by critics of dwelling excessively on hardship, yet Loach insists upon context. His characters are not exhibits. They exist within systems: labour markets, bureaucracies, housing shortages, privatisation, austerity. Their suffering is political rather than zoological. The viewer is not invited to gawp but to recognise.

Reality television, by contrast, frequently strips away systems in favour of personality. Poverty becomes an atmosphere rather than an economy. The audience encounters endless symptoms and almost no causes. One sees unpaid electricity meters but not energy policy; food banks but not wage stagnation; addiction but not despair; overcrowding but not housing speculation. Structural analysis disappears because structural analysis interrupts the emotional simplicity of contempt.

Even the aesthetics of these programmes betray their intentions. The ominous music. The zoom cuts during arguments. The comic timing applied to scenes of financial incompetence. The repeated close-ups of cigarettes, takeaway cartons, stained furniture, broken appliances. The poor are filmed with the visual language once used for tabloid crime reporting or wildlife documentaries. They are observed rather than understood.

The participants themselves are often trapped in impossible bargains. Many agree to appear on television because they need money, attention, or temporary opportunity. Some hope exposure might lead to assistance. Others enjoy the novelty or believe the programme will present them sympathetically. Few

possess meaningful control over editing or framing. Once broadcast, their lives become public property. Strangers dissect their parenting online. Tabloids mock their appearance. Employers, neighbours, and schools recognise them. The humiliation lingers long after the production crew leaves.

Meanwhile the broadcasters collect ratings, awards, advertising revenue and cultural prestige for their supposed bravery in "showing reality."

It is tempting to imagine hardship television as a relic of the early reality-TV era, but the form has merely migrated. Social media now industrialises class voyeurism at enormous scale. TikTok creators tour "rough estates." YouTube channels interview addicts and homeless people under the guise of human curiosity. Influencers film themselves giving cash to struggling families while carefully monetising every emotional reaction. The Victorian slum tour has become algorithmic.

And yet the appetite remains fundamentally the same: the desire to witness suffering from a position of safety. There is, of course, a psychological comfort in these spectacles. They reassure viewers that misfortune is containable, localised, and morally explicable. If poverty results from stupidity, irresponsi-

bility, or bad culture, then the audience need not fear becoming poor themselves. Structural explanations are unsettling precisely because they imply vulnerability. Economic systems can fail anyone. Illness, redundancy, rent increases, divorce, inflation, and bad luck are terrifying because they are recognisably ordinary. Hardship television neutralises that fear by transforming poverty into a personality defect.

This is why audiences often react with hostility when poor people on screen display intelligence, dignity, or political awareness. Such moments disrupt the expected hierarchy between observer and observed. The genre depends upon asymmetry. Viewers are meant to feel superior, not implicated.

The deepest obscenity of hardship porn is not that it depicts suffering but that it empties suffering of solidarity. It trains audiences to consume distress aesthetically rather than politically. One watches, judges, tweets, laughs, pities, and moves on. Nothing collective emerges from the experience except contempt.

Victorian slumming eventually declined not because society became less voyeuristic but because the performance of social concern changed form. Today's equivalent wears the language of authentic-

ity, awareness, and raw realism. But the underlying dynamic persists: the powerful observing the powerless for emotional gratification. The freak show never disappeared. It simply learned to call itself factual entertainment.

## Neurodiversity and the lost art of uncomfortable eye contact

There is a particular kind of silence that falls over a conversation when one person notices that the other is not looking at them. Not glancing away occasionally in the ordinary choreography of thought, embarrassment, or distraction, but persistently, structurally, refusing or perhaps simply failing to perform what society has long regarded as the facial handshake of sincerity. The room changes temperature. Something primal stirs. We begin to suspect disrespect, dishonesty, boredom, arrogance, or deficiency. “Look at me when I’m speaking to you,” adults tell children. “Maintain eye contact,” careers advisers instruct graduates. “Good eye contact” appears on school reports, interview feedback forms, and the invisible ledger by which strangers decide whether someone is trustworthy.

And yet, for many autistic people, sustained eye contact is not a sign of honesty or connection but an act of neurological endurance. It can feel invasive, physically uncomfortable, cognitively overloading, even painful. To demand it anyway, especially as a condition for being regarded as polite, employable, emotionally intelligent or socially acceptable is increasingly being recognised not as etiquette but as coercion. What was once considered basic civility now looks, under scrutiny, suspiciously like a cultural ritual enforced by the majority upon those whose minds work differently.

The argument emerging from modern neurodiversity advocacy is both simple and unsettling: perhaps the problem is not that autistic people fail at social communication, but that neurotypical society has mistaken its own preferences for universal moral truths.

This is, in part, a story about eyes. But it is also a story about power. In 1967, the sociologist Erving Goffman published *Interaction Ritual*, a study of the tiny performances through which social order is maintained. Goffman was fascinated by the unspoken mechanics of ordinary encounters: how people signal attentiveness, deference, embarrassment, in-

terest, status, and cooperation. Human interaction, in his view, depended upon ritualised behaviour so deeply ingrained that most people never consciously noticed it. Eye contact mattered enormously in this framework. To look at someone appropriately, not too intensely, not too fleetingly, was to reassure them that the invisible contract of social life remained intact.

Goffman understood that these rituals were not trivial. They were stabilising acts. Society depended on millions of small mutual recognitions. We look at one another to confirm presence, intention, and legitimacy. The entire architecture of modern professional culture rests upon this premise. Teachers reward eye contact because they read it as engagement. Judges expect it because they associate it with remorse or credibility. Employers seek it because they interpret it as confidence. Therapists, police officers, doctors, and dates all participate in the same interpretive economy.

The difficulty is that these rituals were codified almost entirely around neurotypical behaviour. For decades, autistic people were treated less as participants in social life than as failed imitators of it. Autism research often approached social difference as

deficit by default. A child who avoided eye contact was assumed to lack empathy, attachment, interest, or emotional reciprocity. Behavioural interventions sought correction. Parents were instructed to encourage "appropriate" gaze patterns. Therapists developed systems of rewards and prompts to train children into performing normative social behaviours. The logic behind these interventions was usually presented as compassionate pragmatism: society values eye contact; therefore autistic people must learn it in order to succeed.

But embedded within this assumption is a question that has become increasingly difficult to avoid: succeed on whose terms?

The neurodiversity movement, which gained broader public visibility in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, reframed conditions like autism not primarily as diseases to be cured but as variations in human cognition. This shift was not merely semantic. It challenged the moral authority of the norm itself. If autistic communication styles are neurologically rooted rather than wilfully oppositional, then forcing conformity begins to resemble cultural assimilation more than education.

The eye-contact debate illustrates this tension with unusual clarity because it exposes how quickly etiquette becomes ideology.

Most neurotypical people experience eye contact as natural and emotionally informative. They genuinely feel more connected when it occurs. They often cannot imagine intimacy without it. But the inability to imagine an alternative experience is not proof of universality. For some autistic people, eye contact competes for neurological processing power. Looking directly into another person's face may interfere with language comprehension itself. Some describe conversations becoming easier when they can stare at the floor, a wall, or a moving object. Others report that eye contact feels overwhelmingly intimate, as though someone had suddenly turned a torch directly into their nervous system.

One autistic woman once described professional networking events as "trying to solve algebra while someone shines headlights into your skull". The metaphor sounds exaggerated only if one assumes that everyone experiences faces similarly.

What neurotypical society frequently interprets as disengagement may, in fact, represent concentration. This mismatch creates a peculiar and often cruel par-

adox. Autistic people are routinely told that eye contact demonstrates listening, while simultaneously finding that making eye contact impairs their ability to listen. They are punished either way. Look away, and they appear rude. Look directly, and they may lose track of the conversation entirely, or perform eye contact so deliberately that it appears uncanny and scripted. Many autistic adults become experts in calculated gaze management: counting seconds, looking between eyebrows, rehearsing facial expressions, monitoring posture, timing nods. Social interaction becomes less a spontaneous exchange than a high-speed manual operation conducted under surveillance.

The psychological cost of this performance can be enormous. The modern vocabulary for this phenomenon is "masking": the suppression of natural autistic behaviours in order to appear neurotypical. Masking can involve forcing eye contact, mimicking conversational rhythms, rehearsing jokes, suppressing stimming, moderating tone of voice, or manufacturing facial expressions deemed socially acceptable. Many autistic adults report learning these techniques not because they improve communication but because failure to perform them invites punishment, exclusion, or suspicion.

The consequences accumulate quietly over years. Exhaustion. Anxiety. Identity diffusion. Burnout. A chronic sense that one's social existence is contingent upon permanent theatrical labour.

What makes the issue especially complicated is that neurotypical expectations are rarely enforced maliciously. Most people who insist upon eye contact believe they are encouraging respectfulness or confidence. A teacher telling a child to "look at me when I'm talking" seldom imagines themselves participating in ableist conditioning. Politeness, after all, feels morally neutral to those whose nervous systems were already designed for it.

But social norms become oppressive precisely when they masquerade as neutral. The historian Norbert Elias argued that what societies call "civilised behaviour" often reflects the preferences of dominant groups elevated into universal standards. Table manners, accents, dress codes, and bodily comportment all carry hidden assumptions about class, power, and legitimacy. Neurotypical social rituals may function similarly. Eye contact is not biologically sacred. It is culturally interpreted behaviour attached to moral meaning.

And those meanings shift dramatically across history and geography. In some cultures, prolonged eye contact is considered aggressive or disrespectful. In others, it signifies confidence. Even within Britain, standards vary according to class, region, gender, and institutional setting. The supposedly obvious rules of social engagement are less timeless truths than negotiated conventions.

Autistic advocacy forces an uncomfortable recognition: if eye contact norms are socially constructed, why are autistic people expected to bear the entire burden of adaptation?

Why is flexibility treated as a one-way obligation? The answer, in part, is numerical power. Neurotypical communication styles dominate public life because neurotypical people dominate public life. Offices, classrooms, interviews, and social rituals are built around their assumptions about what attention looks like. The autistic employee who avoids eye contact is perceived as lacking professionalism; the neurotypical manager who demands eye contact is perceived as maintaining standards.

This asymmetry reveals how ableism often operates not through overt hostility but through compulsory normality. There remains, of course, a reasona-

ble concern beneath the defensiveness some people feel when these norms are questioned. Human beings do rely upon shared behavioural expectations. Social interaction cannot function if every convention dissolves entirely into subjective preference. Eye contact, for many people, genuinely facilitates trust and emotional connection. To acknowledge that autistic people experience it differently does not require pretending that all communication styles are interchangeable or consequence-free.

But accommodation is not the same thing as abolition. The neurodiversity argument is not that nobody should ever value eye contact. It is that moral worth should not hinge upon the ability or willingness to perform it. A colleague who looks at the carpet while speaking may still be attentive, respectful, empathetic, and intellectually engaged. An employee who fidgets may still be competent. A child who avoids eye contact may still feel love.

The deeper challenge posed by autistic advocacy is existential rather than procedural. It asks neurotypical society to confront how much of what it considers "human connection" is actually pattern recognition. We are comforted by familiar signals and distrust unfamiliar ones. We mistake fluency for sincerity.

We reward those who mirror expected behaviour and penalise those who communicate differently.

This is not unique to autism. People with accents deemed "wrong", emotional expressions deemed "flat", or body language deemed "odd" encounter similar suspicion. The social world runs on thin slices of interpretation made rapidly and often unfairly.

Autistic people simply expose the machinery more visibly than most. There is something faintly tragic about how often discussions of autism become discussions about performance rather than understanding. Entire industries have emerged around teaching autistic people how to appear less autistic. Far less attention has been devoted to teaching neurotypical people how to tolerate discomfort, ambiguity, or unfamiliarity in communication.

Because that, ultimately, is what the eye-contact debate threatens: neurotypical comfort. It is uncomfortable to speak to someone who does not follow expected cues. Uncomfortable to lose the reassuring mirror of mutual gaze. Uncomfortable to realise that behaviours we associate with honesty or warmth may not be universal indicators at all. But discomfort alone is not evidence of dysfunction. Sometimes it is

merely the sensation of encountering another mind without demanding it imitate our own.

Modern diversity rhetoric often celebrates difference abstractly while punishing it concretely. Companies proclaim inclusion initiatives and then reject candidates who fail to display “executive presence”. Schools discuss acceptance while disciplining children for atypical social behaviour. Society applauds authenticity provided authenticity remains aesthetically familiar.

Eye contact sits at the centre of this contradiction because it is so intimate, so symbolic, and so automatic. To question its moral status feels, to some people, like questioning civilisation itself.

Yet perhaps civilisation should be robust enough to survive a conversation in which someone looks out of the window while listening carefully.

Perhaps genuine inclusion requires more than tolerating difference once it has been translated into acceptable forms. Perhaps it demands relinquishing the fantasy that there is only one correct way to inhabit social space.

Goffman understood that interaction rituals hold societies together. What he could not fully anticipate was the degree to which those rituals would later be interrogated by people excluded from their unwritten rules. The modern neurodiversity movement does not reject social connection. On the contrary, it asks for a broader definition of it. One less dependent on compulsory performance. One less obsessed with visual choreography. One capable of recognising attention without demanding eye contact as tribute.

The irony is that autistic people are often accused of lacking empathy precisely by those unwilling to imagine how unbearable ordinary interaction can feel through a different nervous system. To insist upon eye contact at all costs is not merely to request a gesture. It is to assert that comfort belongs, by default, to the majority.

And perhaps the truly polite thing, the genuinely civilised thing, is not demanding that everyone meet our gaze, but learning to listen when they cannot.

## The return of the dowry
## How student loan debt functions as a neo-dowry system

In the popular imagination, the dowry belongs to a distant moral universe: sepia-toned villages, arranged marriages, the quiet transfer of wealth from one family to another under the watchful eye of tradition. It is treated as an artefact of social history, a practice largely abandoned by modernity's advance toward individual autonomy. And yet, in a manner that is both subtle and disquieting, something structurally similar appears to have re-emerged in the financial architecture of contemporary courtship.

It does not arrive in carved wooden chests or gold coins. It arrives as spreadsheets, interest rates, repay-

ment schedules, and the quiet disclosure of liabilities over dinner. In place of a bride's family assembling assets to secure her passage into marriage, young adults now bring with them the accumulated weight of their education, funded, more often than not, through debt. And increasingly, that debt is not simply personal. It is relational. It becomes something that must be accounted for, absorbed, negotiated, or, in some cases, quietly rejected.

The claim that student loan debt functions as a kind of neo-dowry system is, at first glance, deliberately provocative. It risks flattening two very different economic and cultural arrangements into a single metaphor. But the comparison becomes harder to dismiss when one examines how debt now shapes the timing, structure, and emotional calculus of marriage among Millennials and Gen Z adults.

Historically, dowries operated as a transfer of wealth designed to stabilise a union. In medieval Europe, they were part of a broader system of family alliances, inheritance strategies, and property consolidation. A bride's dowry could signal social standing, compensate for her maintenance or function as a form of early inheritance. Crucially, it was not merely symbolic; it was economic infrastructure. Marriage

was not just a romantic union but a financial merger between families.

In the twenty-first century, marriage in many Western societies is framed as the culmination of individual choice rather than familial arrangement. Yet the economic conditions under which that choice is exercised have become increasingly structured by debt. Student loans, in particular, have transformed higher education from a social investment into a personal liability. Where education once functioned as a pathway to upward mobility, it now often begins adulthood with a negative balance sheet.

The shift is not merely numerical. It is temporal. Debt alters the rhythm of life decisions. Marriage, home ownership, and even childbearing are postponed not simply because of cultural preference or changing values, but because the financial preconditions for partnership have become more stringent. The idea of "being ready" for marriage increasingly includes the implicit requirement of being financially disentangled from one's own education.

This is where the dowry analogy becomes more than rhetorical flourish. In traditional dowry systems, the financial attributes of the bride were cen-

tral to the viability of the marriage. In contemporary debt economies, the inverse appears to be true: the absence of debt has itself become a desirable trait. A young adult with significant student loans may be perceived, consciously or otherwise, as a financial burden that accompanies the individual into the relationship. The debt is not theirs alone; it is imported into the marital unit.

One might object that this is simply the logic of any shared financial future. After all, modern marriages routinely involve the pooling of assets and liabilities. Yet student debt occupies a peculiar moral and structural position within this economy. Unlike mortgages, which are tied to a tangible asset, or business loans, which are framed as investments with potential returns, educational debt is often abstracted from any immediate material gain. Its benefits are deferred, its costs immediate, and its repayment schedule rigidly individualised.

This individualisation is key. The student borrower is treated as a self-contained economic unit, even as their life outcomes are profoundly relational. When two such units form a partnership, the debts do not simply disappear; they combine, interact, and shape joint possibilities. In this sense, marriage becomes

less a romantic union than a consolidation of financial biographies.

It is here that the neo-dowry system reveals its most unsettling feature. In classical dowry arrangements, wealth moved with intention between families, reinforcing alliances. In the contemporary debt landscape, liability moves invisibly between individuals and their future relationships. No family formally negotiates the transfer. No ceremonial exchange occurs. Instead, the burden is embedded within the life course itself, quietly conditioning who marries whom, and when.

Consider the growing tendency among young adults to delay marriage until debts are "under control." This phrase, often uttered with a mixture of pragmatism and resignation, conceals a deeper structural reality. Control does not mean elimination. It means reaching a threshold at which debt no longer feels like an active constraint on relational possibility. In practice, this threshold is increasingly difficult to reach before the age at which previous generations were already married, housed, and starting families.

The result is a temporal dislocation between biological, social, and economic timelines. People do

not stop desiring partnership or family life; they simply recalibrate those desires against financial conditions that make early commitment feel irresponsible. Romance is not abolished but it is deferred into a later, more financially "stable" phase of life, one that is itself increasingly elusive.

There is another layer to the analogy that complicates it further. Traditional dowries were typically arranged and paid by families, not individuals. They were collective strategies embedded in kinship structures. Student debt, by contrast, is individualised not only in its legal form but in its moral framing. It is often presented as a personal investment decision, a choice made in pursuit of self-improvement. This framing obscures the extent to which it is also a structural requirement for participation in modern labour markets.

Yet when individuals with such debts enter relationships, the distinction between personal choice and shared burden begins to blur. The debt, though legally singular, becomes socially plural. It shapes housing decisions, consumption patterns, and even emotional dynamics within the couple. Discussions about marriage can become quietly entangled with questions of repayment schedules and interest accru-

als. Love, in this context, is not simply tested by circumstance; it is structured by it.

If one were to push the dowry analogy further, one might say that contemporary romantic selection is increasingly sensitive to "net worth profiles," broadly defined. This is not necessarily a cynical process. It is often unconscious, embedded in the ordinary pragmatics of life planning. Yet it echoes the logic of earlier systems in which marriage was inseparable from economic compatibility. The difference is that today's compatibility is often measured not in assets, but in the absence of liabilities.

This inversion produces its own form of inequality. Those who graduate without debt, often due to family wealth, enter the dating and marriage market with a kind of financial neutrality that others lack. They are not necessarily richer in income, but they are less encumbered in obligation. In a system where debt is widespread, neutrality becomes an advantage. It is a quiet form of inheritance, structurally analogous to the dowries of the past, though stripped of their ceremonial visibility.

The emotional consequences of this are harder to quantify but no less significant. Debt introduces a subtle asymmetry into relationships, particularly

when partners differ in their financial starting points. Even in egalitarian partnerships, the knowledge that one person carries a longer or heavier repayment burden can shape decisions about risk, mobility, and long-term planning. The language of "we" in such relationships is always slightly shadowed by the arithmetic of "mine" and "yours."

And yet it would be reductive to frame this entirely as a story of constraint. Debt also produces forms of resilience, negotiation, and shared strategy that can deepen relational bonds. Couples routinely build intricate financial architectures together, balancing repayment with aspiration, austerity with ambition. In some cases, the act of managing debt becomes part of the relationship's early identity, a shared problem to solve, rather than a barrier to overcome.

Still, the broader structural question remains. If marriage is increasingly conditioned by pre-existing financial obligations, then the boundary between personal choice and economic inheritance becomes harder to locate. The neo-dowry is not a return to tradition, but a transformation of its logic. It is decentralised, individualised, and obscured by the language of personal responsibility.

The irony is that modern societies often understand themselves as having moved beyond the very systems they have, in modified form, reconstituted. The dowry is condemned as archaic, patriarchal, and coercive. Student debt, by contrast, is framed as rational, meritocratic, and voluntary. Yet both systems, in their respective contexts, organise marriageability through the distribution of economic burden.

To recognise this is not to collapse the differences between them, nor to suggest a simple equivalence. It is, rather, to observe how financial structures shape intimate life in ways that are not always visible to those living within them. Marriage may no longer be arranged by families, but it is still arranged, by balance sheets, by credit histories by the slow accumulation of interest over time.

In this sense, the dowry has not disappeared. It has changed form. It is no longer a gift carried into marriage, but a shadow carried into adulthood.

## Why "trauma bonding" is the most misused phrase on the internet

There is a particular kind of internet phrase that begins life as a clinical or at least carefully observed concept and then, almost inevitably, dissolves into something softer, broader, and ultimately less accurate. "Trauma bonding" has become one of the more recent casualties of this process. Scroll through social media for long enough and you will find it applied to nearly every instance of emotional friction: friends who complain about work together, couples who weather a difficult year, colleagues who share a gallows humour about a failing organisation. It has become a kind of all-purpose glue for shared suffering. In the process, its original meaning has been stretched almost beyond recognition.

This matters less for semantic purity than for what gets erased when precision is lost. Real trauma bonding is not the warm afterglow of mutual hardship. It is a psychological attachment forged in cycles of abuse, fear, and intermittent reinforcement, in which the victim's sense of safety becomes entangled with the very person or system causing harm. To describe it as "bonding over difficult times" is not simply an exaggeration. It is a category error with moral consequences.

The term is often loosely conflated with what popular psychology calls Stockholm syndrome, a phrase born from a 1970s bank robbery in Stockholm, where hostages developed apparent emotional connections to their captors. The original case was complex, debated, and in many ways misrepresented in the popular imagination from the start. Yet what followed in psychological research was at least an attempt to describe a paradoxical survival response: in conditions of captivity or coercive control, the mind may attach itself to the source of threat as a strategy of psychological preservation. It is not affection in any ordinary sense. It is adaptation under duress.

In the decades that followed, clinicians studying domestic abuse and coercive relationships refined

the idea further. Trauma bonding, in its more precise formulation, describes a cyclical pattern: periods of harm or emotional volatility followed by reconciliation, kindness, or relief. The inconsistency itself becomes addictive. The victim learns to orient their emotional world around small mercies, interpreting intermittent warmth as evidence of underlying love or change. The bond is not built on shared experience but on destabilisation.

This distinction is not academic. It is the difference between choosing to endure discomfort together and being conditioned to remain within a harmful dynamic. One is relational struggle; the other is entrapment that can feel, from the inside, indistinguishable from attachment.

Yet somewhere along the way, particularly in the ecosystem of digital self-help, the term has been flattened. It has become a kind of emotional shorthand for "we went through something intense together". Two people who survive a difficult project at work? Trauma bonding. Friends who commiserate about burnout? Trauma bonding. A couple who argue and reconcile? Trauma bonding, too. The phrase has drifted so far from its clinical grounding that it now

often functions as a vague synonym for intimacy under stress.

Part of the appeal is obvious. “Trauma bonding” carries a gravity that ordinary words lack. It makes ordinary emotional experiences feel charged with psychological significance. In a culture that increasingly encourages people to narrate their inner lives in therapeutic language, this inflation is almost inevitable. The vocabulary of psychiatry has become a shared aesthetic, and like any aesthetic, it is subject to distortion when detached from its original context.

But there is a more troubling consequence. When trauma bonding is used to describe ordinary shared hardship, it dilutes the conceptual tools needed to recognise actual coercion and abuse. If everything is trauma bonding, then nothing is. The term loses its ability to name a specific and dangerous relational pattern. And for those who are, in fact, caught in such patterns, the erosion of language can become another barrier to recognition. Abuse thrives not only in secrecy but in misrecognition.

There is also a subtle moral flattening at work. Calling every intense connection a trauma bond risks recasting mutual vulnerability as pathology. Two

people supporting each other through grief are not necessarily trapped in a cycle of psychological conditioning. Friends who survive adversity together are not automatically bound by dysfunctional reinforcement patterns. To insist otherwise is to pathologise solidarity itself.

The irony is that the original concept was designed to do the opposite: to illuminate why people remain in situations that appear, from the outside, to be obviously harmful. It was never intended as a commentary on emotional intensity in general. It was, rather, a description of how power and unpredictability can reshape attachment at its most basic level.

The internet, however, does not reward restraint. It rewards expansion. Terms that are emotionally resonant tend to spread not by careful application but by metaphorical drift. "Gaslighting" is now used to describe any disagreement. "Narcissist" has become a casual insult for selfish behaviour. "Trauma bonding" has joined this lexicon of inflated clinical language, where specificity is sacrificed in favour of expressive reach.

None of this is to suggest that people are wrong to search for language that captures the complexity

of their relationships. On the contrary, the demand is real. Human relationships are often confusing, contradictory, and emotionally dense. But precision matters precisely because these experiences are difficult to describe. When language becomes too loose, it stops clarifying and starts performing.

There is a further irony in how "trauma bonding" is often used in spaces that present themselves as psychologically literate. Wellness culture, with its emphasis on naming and validating emotional experience, has created an environment in which clinical terms circulate widely without clinical context. The intention is usually benign: to give people words for things they struggled to articulate. Yet without grounding, those words can become decorative rather than diagnostic.

It may be more useful, then, to reserve "trauma bonding" for what it was meant to describe: the paradoxical attachment that can form under conditions of fear, control, and intermittent reward. Everything else, shared hardship, emotional closeness forged in difficulty, even intense relational dependency, has other names or perhaps simply requires more careful description.

There is, after all, no shortage of language for the ordinary difficulties of being human together. Friendship, loyalty, codependence, solidarity, endurance. Not every painful or intense connection is evidence of psychological capture. Some are simply relationships under strain. Others are relationships that deepen precisely because they are tested.

To call all of these "trauma bonding" is to mistake the map for the terrain, and in doing so, to flatten a landscape that is already difficult enough to navigate. The concept was never meant to be elastic. It was meant to be exact. And in a cultural moment that often prefers resonance to accuracy, that exactness is worth defending.

## Digital hoarding
## The unspoken environmental cost of "keeping everything"

There is a particular kind of modern abundance that does not look like abundance at all. It sits quietly in the background of our lives, invisible and weightless on the surface: photographs we never open, emails we never read, screenshots of articles we meant to return to, entire video libraries we will never watch again. It accumulates without friction. It asks for no shelf space, no attic, no garage. And because it demands so little of us, we have come to believe it costs almost nothing in return.

We call it convenience. The cloud. Memory. Storage. What it is, increasingly, is hoarding at planetary scale.

Digital hoarding does not resemble the clinical scenes that once defined the term. There are no nar-

row hallways carved through stacks of newspapers, no bathtubs filled with broken appliances, no doors that can no longer fully open. Instead, there is something more disquieting: a sense of orderliness that conceals excess. Everything is sorted into folders, backed up twice, synchronised across devices. The clutter is immaculate.

Yet the underlying psychology is not so different from the behaviour that entered psychiatric classification in the late twentieth century. When hoarding disorder was formally recognised in the diagnostic language of the DSM-III and its successors, it was framed as an inability to discard possessions, often driven by anxiety, attachment, or a fear of loss. The objects themselves mattered less than what they represented: continuity, identity, control against uncertainty. To throw something away was not merely an act of disposal but a small rehearsal of absence.

Digital hoarding extends this logic into a realm where absence has been disguised as irrelevance. Nothing is ever truly gone; it is merely archived. The psychological bargain becomes easier to sustain because deletion feels reversible, even if it is not. We are encouraged, explicitly and implicitly, not to let go. Storage is cheap. Memory is infinite. The promise is that we will one day return to all of it.

We rarely do. Behind this personal accumulation sits an infrastructure that is anything but immaterial. The language of "the cloud" is one of the most successful pieces of euphemism in recent technological history. It suggests something atmospheric, benign, without edges or weight. In reality, it is a global network of data centres: warehouse-sized facilities filled with servers, cooling systems, backup generators, and the constant hum of energy consumption.

These facilities do not merely store information; they metabolise electricity. They require vast amounts of power to operate and even more to cool. The carbon footprint of global data storage is difficult to summarise precisely because it is constantly shifting, distributed across jurisdictions, and expanding with little friction. But what is clear is that it is no longer marginal. The more we store, the more infrastructure is required to sustain the illusion that nothing is being stored at all.

There is a strange asymmetry here. On the user's side, the act of keeping a photograph is weightless. On the infrastructural side, that same photograph participates in a chain of physical processes: mined minerals, manufactured servers, transported hardware, continuous electricity draw, heat dispersion. A single file is negligible; billions of files are not.

And yet the cultural direction of travel is unmistakable. We are encouraged to record everything and forget nothing. Applications prompt us with nostalgic reminders of "this day, five years ago." Cameras default to constant readiness. Messaging platforms retain histories indefinitely. Even our work lives have adopted the logic of total retention: drafts, revisions, backups, version histories stacked without end.

What we have built, without quite naming it, is an externalised memory system that refuses forgetting as a principle. This refusal has a psychological dimension that is often overlooked. Digital hoarding is not simply laziness or convenience. It is, in many cases, a subtle defence against impermanence. To delete something is to accept that a version of the self, an intention, a moment, a relationship, will not be revisited. To keep it is to preserve the possibility that it still exists somewhere, waiting.

This is where the comparison with physical hoarding becomes more than metaphorical. In the clinical understanding of hoarding behaviour, possessions are often imbued with emotional weight disproportionate to their practical value. Objects become anchors to identity. Letting go can feel like erasure of the self.

Digital artefacts intensify this dynamic precisely because they are frictionless. A box of old letters takes effort to open; a terabyte of photographs does not. The psychological cost of retention is therefore lowered, even as the total volume of retained material becomes incomprehensible. What was once selective memory becomes indiscriminate accumulation.

There is also a quieter cultural anxiety at work: the fear of forgetting as a moral failure. In an age saturated with documentation, to lose data can feel like negligence. We are told, in subtle ways, that good citizens archive. Good professionals back up. Good parents document childhoods exhaustively. The result is not merely storage, but obligation.

And obligation scales poorly when multiplied across billions of users. The environmental implications of this behaviour are rarely present in everyday decision-making, partly because they are structurally hidden. No one receives an electricity bill for their unused emails. No notification appears when a redundant video is duplicated across three servers on different continents. The costs are absorbed upstream, translated into industrial processes far removed from the act of saving a file.

This separation of cause and consequence creates a moral opacity. We experience digital storage as an abstract good, safe, clean, infinite, while its material counterpart operates in a different register altogether: heat, energy demand, water usage for cooling systems, and the ongoing expansion of physical infrastructure. The cloud, in this sense, is not weightless. It is merely displaced.

What makes this more than an environmental issue is the way it mirrors a broader cultural condition. The refusal to delete is not just about data; it is about time. It reflects an unease with endings in general. A photograph is not just a file but a moment that resists closure. An inbox is not just communication but unresolved potential. To keep everything is to delay the moment when something becomes definitively past.

Yet nothing scales indefinitely. Storage systems do not fail because they run out of space in the way a cupboard does; they fail because the energy, maintenance, and material expansion required to sustain them becomes increasingly demanding. At some point, "keeping everything" becomes indistinguishable from continuous industrial growth.

The irony is that digital hoarding is often justified as prudence. We are told that data has value, that fu-

ture technologies will unlock insights in what we preserve today, that artificial intelligence will depend on vast datasets. There is truth in this. But there is also a familiar pattern: the assumption that accumulation is inherently forward-looking, and that the costs of retention will always be solvable later.

This is the same logic that has accompanied many forms of environmental externalisation: the belief that what is invisible is therefore negotiable.

What is missing from the conversation is not awareness of climate impact in general, but a connection between personal digital behaviour and systemic consequence. It is difficult to feel responsible for something as diffuse as server emissions. It is even more difficult to feel that responsibility when the act itself, saving a file, keeping an email thread, is framed as harmless, even virtuous.

And yet, there is a quiet reckoning embedded in the system already. Data centres are becoming more visible in energy planning debates. Tech companies are increasingly pressed to account for their consumption. Efficiency improvements are real, but so is the growth in demand. The paradox is familiar: as storage becomes more efficient, we store more.

In this sense, digital hoarding is not an anomaly. It is the default behaviour of a system designed to make forgetting feel like a loss rather than a choice.

Perhaps the more unsettling implication is that this is not merely about technology, but about attachment. The question is not why we keep so much, but what we believe we are preserving when we do. Memory, identity, continuity, all of these are at stake. But so too is the refusal to accept finitude as a basic condition of experience.

To delete, in the end, is not only an environmental gesture, though it may be that as well. It is an acknowledgement that presence does not require permanence. That something can matter and still not be kept. That not everything needs to be carried forward in order to be real.

We have built systems that make retention effortless. The question now is whether we can imagine systems, technological and psychological, that make letting go legible again.

## The friendless epidemic
## Why adult male friendship
## is collapsing into transactional activity

On a damp Tuesday evening in a mid-sized British city, a man in his mid-thirties sits in his car outside a gym he has no intention of entering. He scrolls his phone, not because anything in particular demands attention, but because the act of leaving the car would require a transition he is not quite prepared to make. Inside the gym, two acquaintances from work are lifting weights. They will nod when they see him. They may even exchange a few jokes about deadlines or the football table. After forty-five minutes, they will all leave separately.

None of them will suggest doing anything afterwards. This is not loneliness in the cinematic sense. There is no rain-streaked window, no solitary cigarette, no dramatic refusal of company. It is something more ambient and, for that reason, more difficult to name: a life in which male friendship persists only in fragments, distributed across structured activities that end the moment the structure ends.

The contemporary crisis of male friendship is often described as a shortage of connection. That framing is misleading. Connection is everywhere. What is missing is continuity. Male relationships have not disappeared; they have been reorganised into transactional encounters that require justification, scheduling, and often a pre-existing purpose, sport, alcohol, work or digital coordination. The unstructured "being together" has become rare enough to feel almost archaic.

There was a time when it was not. In the 19th century, male friendship, particularly among the educated classes, was frequently sustained through correspondence. Letters were not merely updates; they were extended acts of interiority. Men wrote to each other with a level of emotional articulation that would now feel, in many contexts, almost theatrical.

One finds pages of reflection on doubt, ambition, fear, even affection, not as confessions prompted by crisis but as a normal mode of intellectual companionship. Distance did not weaken these bonds; it structured them. Time was slow enough that thought could accumulate between exchanges.

Of course, this should not be romanticised without reservation. Those friendships existed within rigid social hierarchies, and they were largely inaccessible to many men whose labour and literacy did not permit such sustained reflection. But what is striking, nonetheless, is the expectation that a male bond could be intellectually and emotionally elaborate without needing a shared activity to justify it.

Contrast this with the contemporary "bro" culture that has, in many contexts, replaced it. The modern male friendship is often mediated through activity loops: the pub after work, the five-a-side match, the group chat organised around football predictions or shared memes, the gym session punctuated by short exchanges that are as much about rhythm as meaning. Even when emotional disclosure occurs, it tends to be bracketed—released in brief, intense bursts, often under the influence of alcohol, and then quietly withdrawn from the record the next morning.

The result is not absence but segmentation. Men are together, but only in environments that permit a narrow range of emotional expression. Remove the activity, and the relationship struggles to justify itself.

One might argue that this is simply efficiency. Modern life is fragmented; time is scarce; coordination requires purpose. Yet this explanation collapses under scrutiny. People still find time for relationships they prioritise. What has changed is not availability, but permission. Adult male friendship has become subtly conditional: it is acceptable when it is mediated by something else.

Sport is the most socially sanctioned mediator. It provides structure, conversation topics, a rhythm of attention and distraction. Alcohol serves a similar function, loosening the boundaries of expression while simultaneously ensuring that what is expressed need not be retained with clarity. Work, too, has become an increasingly dominant frame, especially in urban professional settings where colleagues double as social contacts but rarely extend beyond the institutional context that introduced them.

What is missing is the idea that two men might simply exist together without a scaffold. This absence has consequences that are increasingly difficult to

ignore. Public discourse often points to rising loneliness among men, particularly in middle age, and to the stark statistics surrounding male suicide rates in many countries. These are not identical phenomena, but they are related in ways that resist simple explanation. It is tempting to locate the problem in individual psychology or economic pressure alone. But there is also a quieter cultural shift at work: the narrowing of acceptable formats for male emotional proximity.

It is not that men do not feel. It is that they are rarely offered a context in which feeling is not attached to performance. Even language reflects this. Men "catch up," "grab a drink," "hit the gym," "watch the game." The verbs are active, directional, task-oriented. They imply motion rather than dwelling. To "just sit" with another man, without agenda, can feel oddly exposed, as if something essential is missing from the exchange.

You see this especially in the rituals that surround attempted vulnerability. When men do speak openly to each other, it is often framed as an exception: "We don't usually talk about this, but…" or "After a few drinks, I can say this…" The emotional content

is treated as an interruption to the normal mode of interaction, rather than part of it.

The paradox is that men frequently report deep affection for their friends. They describe lifelong bonds, shared histories, mutual loyalty. Yet these bonds often lack infrastructure. They are assumed rather than maintained, recalled rather than practised. Like a language that has survived only in fragments, it remains intelligible but increasingly difficult to speak fluently.

This raises an uncomfortable question: what would it take to make male friendship sustainable outside of transaction? Part of the answer may lie in reclaiming the ordinary. Not every interaction needs to be justified by activity or outcome. There is, in principle, nothing radical about two people sitting in a room without consuming anything, achieving anything, or documenting anything. Yet for many men, this has become an unfamiliar proposition, as though stillness itself requires explanation.

There is also a generational dimension. Older men often describe friendships that were less mediated by scheduling software, less constrained by productivity logic. They "dropped by" each other's houses.

They lingered in garages, gardens, pub corners without fixed departure times. These were not necessarily emotionally articulate relationships, but they were structurally permissive in ways that contemporary life is not.

Younger men, by contrast, inherit a social architecture in which time is pre-allocated and interaction is optimised. Friendship must compete with fitness goals, side projects, digital entertainment, and the perpetual low-grade anxiety of underachievement. In such an environment, relationships that require no output can appear inefficient, even indulgent.

Yet the costs of this efficiency are accumulating. When male friendship becomes overly dependent on mediated contexts, it loses resilience. It cannot easily absorb change—job loss, relocation, mental health decline—because it was never designed to exist outside stable conditions. It is buoyant in routine and fragile in disruption.

There is a further complication: vulnerability itself has been partially rebranded. In contemporary culture, emotional openness is often encouraged, but within specific, performative formats. Men are told to "open up," but rarely shown how that openness

might exist outside therapeutic or crisis-driven contexts. The result is a kind of emotional punctuation: confession without continuity, disclosure without structure.

This may help explain why moments of male emotional honesty so often feel isolated rather than integrated. A man speaks at a wedding, or during a late-night conversation, or in the aftermath of a difficult event, and something real is said. But the social environment around it does not change. The next interaction returns to sport, logistics, jokes. The emotional moment floats free, unanchored.

And so the pattern repeats. None of this is to suggest that male friendship is "disappearing" in any simple sense. Men still gather, still laugh, still support one another in practical and meaningful ways. But the form has changed in subtle ways that matter. What is disappearing is not friendship itself, but its unstructured dimension, the part that is not organised around activity, justification, or performance.

It may be that this dimension was always more fragile than we imagine, historically dependent on cultural conditions that no longer exist. Or it may be that we have simply forgotten how to sustain it.

Either way, the consequences are no longer abstract. They are visible in waiting rooms, in late-night message threads that never quite become plans, in gym car parks where men sit for longer than they intended because the transition into and out of social contact has become, paradoxically, the hardest part.

The problem is not that men have stopped being friends. It is that friendship has become something they must now do, rather than something they inhabit.

## How "setting boundaries" became justified cruelty

It is a peculiar feature of contemporary moral life that the language of care so often arrives dressed as its opposite. Words once associated with attentiveness, empathy, and repair have begun to circulate in contexts that feel, to some ears at least, less like healing than disengagement. Among them, none has travelled further or hardened more in public imagination, than the phrase "setting boundaries".

Once a modest clinical term, it now appears everywhere: in text messages that end relationships, in social media captions that announce departures, in workplace apologies that are not apologies at all. "I

am setting a boundary," someone writes, and what follows may be anything from a refusal to answer messages to the dissolution of a decade-long friendship. The phrase carries an unmistakable air of moral legitimacy, as though the utterance itself transforms the act from rejection into responsibility.

It is worth asking how a vocabulary developed within therapeutic contexts, designed, in principle, to protect fragile psyches and clarify interpersonal limits, has become so readily deployed in the everyday management of inconvenience, discomfort, and, at times, plain dislike.

To trace this shift, one must return, if not to the origins of therapy itself, then at least to one of its more influential mid-century articulations: Carl Rogers' client-centred approach. Rogers, writing in the 1950s and 60s, proposed something radical for its time: that individuals possess an inherent capacity for self-understanding and growth provided they are met with empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard. The therapist was not an authority imposing meaning, but a facilitator creating conditions in which meaning could emerge.

It is easy, in hindsight, to miss how restrained this vision was in its ethical ambition. Rogers did not

propose a world in which all discomfort should be avoided, nor did he imagine interpersonal obligations could be dissolved by declaration. His emphasis was relational rather than eliminative: understanding the self in order to remain in better relation to others, not to escape them.

Yet ideas, once released into culture, rarely remain intact. They are repackaged, simplified, and rendered portable. Over decades, the language of therapy migrated from the consulting room into the self-help book, then into workplace seminars, and finally into the algorithmically accelerated environment of social media. What was once descriptive became prescriptive; what was once careful became catchy.

"Boundaries," in their contemporary usage, often function less as negotiated limits than as moral shields. They are invoked not merely to articulate needs but to justify withdrawal. The phrase carries a paradoxical tone: at once assertive and absolving. It allows the speaker to frame disengagement not as an act of choice, but as an act of necessity. In doing so, it removes ambiguity and with it, the possibility of shared struggle over what a relationship might require.

There is, of course, a genuine and important insight embedded in the concept. People do need limits. Without them, relationships become sites of coercion, exhaustion, or emotional overreach. The difficulty lies not in the idea of boundaries themselves, but in their inflation into a kind of universal explanatory key. Not "I cannot do this without harm to myself", but "this makes me uncomfortable, therefore it must stop"; not "this relationship is unsafe", but "this relationship is inconvenient, therefore it is unethical for me to continue it".

What has changed is not simply the language, but the moral atmosphere it creates. To refuse a request used to require justification, sometimes even negotiation. Now, refusal increasingly presents itself as self-justifying. The boundary is not argued for; it is declared.

This shift is particularly visible in the aesthetics of digital communication. Instagram templates and short-form videos distil complex relational dilemmas into digestible aphorisms: "You don't owe anyone access to you," "Protect your peace," "If they wanted to, they would." These phrases circulate with the calming authority of wisdom, yet they often function as

closures rather than openings. They do not invite dialogue; they conclude it.

One might reasonably ask what kind of social world emerges when every friction is interpreted through the lens of self-protection. The promise is tranquillity. The risk is something closer to emotional privatisation: the gradual transformation of relationships into optional engagements, revocable at the first sign of discomfort.

To criticise this trend is not to romanticise endurance of mistreatment, nor to suggest that people should remain in harmful situations out of duty. That would be to misunderstand the genuine ethical achievement embedded in contemporary therapeutic discourse: the insistence that suffering is not, in itself, a moral requirement. Many people have used the language of boundaries to escape coercive families, exploitative workplaces, or relationships sustained by guilt rather than care. The point is not that boundaries are false, but that they are no longer rare.

The problem arises when a language designed to protect against harm becomes a language that legitimises avoidance of difficulty. Not all discomfort is harm; not all emotional friction is violation. Yet the

contemporary grammar of selfhood often struggles to distinguish between the two. In its most compressed form, discomfort becomes danger, and danger demands exit.

There is also a quieter irony here. The more absolute the boundary becomes, the more it risks reproducing the very isolation it was meant to prevent. A life composed primarily of exits may be safe, but it is also thin. Relationships, by their nature, require a degree of permeability: the willingness to be affected, occasionally unsettled, and sometimes changed by others. A boundary that permits no negotiation ceases to be a boundary at all and becomes a wall, well-intentioned perhaps but still a separation.

It is tempting to locate blame in therapy itself, but this would be too simple. Therapy did not invent the contemporary appetite for self-definition; it merely provided a vocabulary for it. The deeper force is cultural: a broader shift towards individual autonomy as the primary moral good. In such a context, any language that can be translated into personal sovereignty will be quickly absorbed and repurposed.

What is striking is not that people have learned to protect themselves, but that protection has become

indistinguishable from righteousness. To withdraw is not merely to choose distance; it is to enact a virtue. And once withdrawal becomes virtuous, the question of relational responsibility becomes harder to ask without sounding like an infringement.

None of this is to suggest a return to an earlier, more coercive moral order in which endurance was mistaken for virtue and silence for strength. The history of relationships is too often a history of unspoken suffering to make such nostalgia credible. But it is possible to wonder whether something has been lost in the translation from care to self-protection: a tolerance for ambiguity, perhaps, or a willingness to remain in situations that are not ideal but still meaningful.

The challenge, then, is not to abandon the idea of boundaries, but to recover their texture. A boundary worth having is not simply a line that ends a conversation, but a structure that makes continued relation possible. It is less a door slammed shut than a door that can be opened and closed with intention.

If therapeutic language now sometimes appears as a tool for abrupt departure, it may be because it has been asked to do too much work in a culture increas-

ingly uncomfortable with obligation. But language, like relationships, can be re-inhabited. The question is whether we are still willing to use it for the difficult middle ground it was originally meant to describe: neither abandonment nor absorption, but something more fragile in between.

## The asexual Renaissance as a response to economic, not just social, pressure

On a grey afternoon in a rented flat somewhere in South London or perhaps Manchester, or Berlin, or any other city where the rent rises faster than the wage slips, the question arrives with a kind of weary inevitability: why bother sharing a home with anyone at all?

It is not asked aloud, usually. It appears instead in spreadsheets, in the quiet arithmetic of bills divided two ways that still feel too large, in the calculus of commutes that become intolerable once doubled,

in the slow recognition that intimacy, once imagined as an economic shorthand for survival, has begun to look like a luxury good. In this atmosphere, even desire can start to feel like overhead.

Against this backdrop, a quiet cultural shift has been observed, discussed, and sometimes misunderstood: a reported rise in people identifying as asexual. The dominant interpretation tends to orbit the familiar terrain of social liberalisation. We are told, broadly, that younger generations are more open, more expressive, more willing to name identities that previous eras would have left unspoken or unnamed. That is undoubtedly part of the story. But there is another, less comfortable explanation circulating beneath it, less about liberation than constraint, less about abundance than scarcity.

What if some portion of what is being described as asexual identity is also a response to economic life as it is now structured? Not in a reductive sense, not as a cynical dismissal of identity itself, but as an expression shaped, like so many forms of modern selfhood by material conditions that are anything but neutral.

The argument is not that asexuality is "caused" by housing costs, as if desire were a simple lever that responds mechanically to rent inflation. Rather, it is

that contemporary economic conditions have altered the practical horizon in which intimacy is imagined, pursued, or sustained. And when the horizon shifts, language follows.

To understand this, one might begin not with sex, but with space. In the post-war decades in much of Western Europe, the idea of forming a couple was often synonymous with forming a household. Wages, while unevenly distributed, were frequently sufficient, especially when combined, to secure a modest but stable domestic arrangement. The architecture of life encouraged cohabitation: mortgages assumed dual incomes, social norms assumed early pairing, and the welfare state, where it existed robustly, partially underwrote the risks of dependency.

Even the cultural rhetoric of the 1970s sexual liberation movement, often remembered as an explosion of personal freedom, unfolded in a materially different world. The rhetoric of choice, who to love, how to love, whether to love at all, was embedded in a context where independence, while never easy, was not structurally penalised in quite the same way it is today. One could, in theory, experiment with relational forms without immediately confronting the full economic penalty of doing so.

Fast forward to the 2020s, and the terrain is markedly different. Housing costs in major cities have decoupled from wage growth. Rental markets are competitive to the point of hostility. Even middle-income earners frequently find themselves sharing flats well into their thirties, not as a transitional stage but as a prolonged condition. In such an environment, cohabitation with a partner is no longer simply a romantic milestone; it is a logistical negotiation with significant financial implications.

This is where the phrase "living apart together" begins to take on more than sociological charm. It becomes a pragmatic adaptation. Couples remain emotionally involved but structurally separate, not necessarily out of ideological preference, but because combining households is either economically irrational or logistically impossible. And in that gap, between emotional life and material constraint identity does its work.

Asexuality, in its most widely understood sense, refers to a lack or absence of sexual attraction. It is a legitimate and increasingly visible identity category, and for many people it is not a response to external conditions but an internal reality that predates any

economic context. To suggest otherwise would be both inaccurate and dismissive.

But cultural identities rarely emerge in a vacuum. They are articulated, refined, and popularised within specific historical pressures. The question worth asking is not whether asexuality is "real" in any given individual case, it clearly is but whether the rise in its visibility is also entangled with broader shifts in how people interpret diminished opportunities for intimacy, partnership or sustained physical closeness.

Consider the psychological elasticity of explanation. When a desired social arrangement becomes difficult to attain, societies tend to adjust the language of desire itself. Sometimes that adjustment is liberatory: new vocabularies expand what is possible. At other times, it is adaptive in a more constrained sense: new vocabularies make absence more liveable.

If sustained partnership becomes economically burdensome, or physically fragmented by work patterns, housing precarity, and urban sprawl, then one possible interpretive move is to reclassify the absence of sexual relationships not as lack, but as identity. Not "I cannot easily form or sustain this kind of relationship under current conditions," but "this is not a

salient dimension of my experience." The distinction matters less as diagnosis than as social grammar.

There is a broader cultural pattern here, of which asexual identity is only one expression. We are living through an era in which autonomy has become both idealised and involuntary. The same economic forces that make cohabitation difficult also make individual independence structurally necessary. Flatshares, gig work, remote employment, subscription-based entertainment, algorithmic sociality, all of these reinforce a life organised around the self as unit of survival.

In such a world, partnership begins to look less like infrastructure and more like optional architecture. And anything optional is vulnerable to being reinterpreted as unnecessary.

This is not to suggest that people are choosing solitude because they are rationally calculating housing costs and concluding that desire is unaffordable. Human experience is far more indirect than that. It is, rather, that when repeated practical barriers accumulate around intimacy, the imagination adapts. One stops expecting certain forms of closeness. One stops organising life around them. Eventually, one

may stop naming them as missed. At that point, what was once a structural limitation begins to resemble a personal orientation.

There is a risk, of course, in economic reductionism. It would be too neat and therefore almost certainly wrong, to claim that rising asexual identification is primarily a disguised response to rent inflation or property speculation. Human sexuality is not so pliable, nor so uniform.

What is more plausible is a layering of causes. Biological disposition, psychological temperament, cultural openness, and economic constraint all intersect. In some individuals, asexuality is a stable and intrinsic identity. In others, relational disinterest may be situational, fluid, or responsive to life stage. And in many cases, it is likely a complex combination of factors that resist tidy categorisation.

Yet even if economics is not causative, it may still be contributory in a subtler sense: by shaping what kinds of lives feel imaginable, and therefore what kinds of identities feel describable.

When it becomes difficult to maintain shared domestic space, when relationships are periodically in-

terrupted by housing insecurity or geographic mobility, when long-term planning is constantly subordinated to short-term survival, then intimacy itself is altered, not eliminated, but refracted. It is experienced less as continuity and more as episodic encounter.

In such a context, the language of desire may lose some of its traditional anchoring. "Asexuality," as a term, can then function not only as a description of attraction, but as a stabilising narrative in an otherwise unstable relational environment.

It would be a mistake to frame this purely as loss. There are freedoms embedded in contemporary relational flexibility that previous generations did not have. The loosening of compulsory coupling has allowed for lives that are less constrained by expectation, less bound to economic dependency within relationships, and more open to diverse forms of companionship.

But freedom that arrives alongside precarity is a complicated gift. The same conditions that allow people to opt out of traditional relationship structures also make those structures harder to sustain in the first place. The result is a cultural landscape

in which non-cohabiting, intermittently connected, or entirely non-physical relationships become more common, not always by choice, but often by necessity.

Within that landscape, the emergence of identities that decentre sexual or romantic partnership can be read in multiple ways. As liberation. As articulation. Or, more cautiously, as adaptation.

If there is a temptation in contemporary commentary, it is to treat identity categories as self-contained truths, floating above material life like constellations untethered from gravity. But identities are also interpretations, ways of organising experience in conditions that are often confusing, constrained, or unevenly distributed.

The rise in asexual identification, then, may indeed reflect greater social permission to name and inhabit a wider range of sexual experiences. But it may also reflect something less frequently acknowledged: a world in which the economic infrastructure of intimacy has weakened, and where the maintenance of traditional forms of cohabitation and partnership has become, for many, materially difficult.

In such a world, the question "why bother sharing a home with anyone at all?" is not merely rhetorical. It is structural. And when structures shift, even desire learns new languages.

# The Hollowed Self

**Jiro Lambert**

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# THE HOLLOWED SELF

**Jiro Lambert.** After a storied tenure engineering scalable systems in Silicon Valley, Jiro Lambert now channels his veteran technical expertise into high-stakes competitive gaming. Balancing a sharp analytical mind with a seasoned strategist's intuition, he remains a dedicated architect of both digital infrastructure and elite virtual gameplay.

JIRO LAMBERT